

DAVID LAWRENCE

The Tonkin Resolution and Politics

When two American naval vessels in Southeast Asian waters were attacked on Aug. 4, 1964, by the North Vietnamese navy, the United States government—which had experienced similar hostilities two days before—ordered its forces to retaliate, and they did, including the bombing of port facilities.

As a result of this incident, which occurred in the Gulf of Tonkin off the coast of Vietnam, President Johnson asked Congress for a joint resolution authorizing him to use the armed forces to help repel the aggressive acts of the North Vietnamese. A broad basis for the request was the commitment the United States had made in the Southeast Asia treaty to come to the defense of nations in the region.

Now, three and one-half years afterwards, Senator J. William Fulbright of Arkansas, Democrat, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations committee, says he is sorry he sponsored the resolution—which was passed by an overwhelming vote of both parties in the Senate and the House.

He questions whether the attacks in 1964 happened as described to his committee at the time or whether the clash between the ships was "provoked" in order to get congressional authority to carry on the war in Vietnam.

Secretary of Defense McNamara was asked by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to give its members comprehensive information and data about the Gulf of Tonkin episodes. Last week he submitted a document, and the senators asked him a variety

of questions. The whole testimony, comprising about 60,000 words, was released over the weekend.

McNamara furnished details, replied to all questions fully, and made this final comment:

"I find it inconceivable that anyone remotely familiar with our society and system of government could suspect the existence of a conspiracy which would include almost, if not all, the entire chain of military command in the Pacific, the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, the joint chiefs, the secretary of defense, and his chief civilian assistants, the secretary of state, and the President of the United States."

But notwithstanding this forthright declaration, some members of the Foreign Relations Committee proceeded to pick out isolated sentences in re-examining the cabled messages from the naval commanders in the Pacific in 1964. These senators sought to show that some other motive was behind the request for the congressional resolution.

Angered by this, Senator Frank Lausche, D-Ohio, said at one point during the hearing in answer to the critics of the administration:

"Are we trying to prove we were not shot at and that we initiated the shooting under a misapprehension of the facts?"

... It looks to me as if it (the meeting of the committee) is trying to put the United States in a bad light and the North Vietnamese in a good light, and I cannot subscribe to that."

What is really behind it all?

Why do members of Congress risk provoking the ill effects upon world opinion which are felt by the United States when prominent members of Congress accuse their own government of the very things that the Communists have been saying continually about American policy?

The only plausible answer is domestic politics. Senator Fulbright is up for re-election this year. He knows the Vietnam war is unpopular, but he voted for the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in 1964. So now he presumably finds it is politically expedient to renounce that vote and criticize the administration for having allegedly misled him.

There is a big question still unanswered: If any members of Congress think the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was a mistake, why haven't they proposed its repeal? They could have done this at any time within the last three and a half years since it was passed.

Six months ago President Johnson himself challenged the opposition to take such a step. He was fully convinced Congress would never venture to adopt a proposal for retreat.

It is hard enough to fight a war at the battlefield where more than 500,000 Americans are striving to protect a small nation from the aggressive acts of Communist imperialism. But it is discouraging for the United States government itself to be confronted by accusations at home, which, as one senator phrased it, tend "to give aid and comfort" to the enemy.

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